

## THEATER IN DUXBURY

By Janice Neubauer

For over a century, theater in Duxbury has been alive, sometimes well, sometimes not so well, sometimes gloriously vital.

For "one brief, shining moment" this community had the crème de la crème of summer theaters. The site was the former Bay Farm, a prime setting on the bay with a glorious view. The playhouse was an enormous barn, converted into a modern theater with a large revolving stage, spacious lobbies and a seating capacity of 350. It was true summer stock, with equity actors who lived on the premises. Players and crew were housed in an ancient farmhouse and auxiliary buildings; some used as offices, dining room and kitchen. Professional directors and scenic designers were on the staff, helped out by people willing to take minimal wages for the opportunity to learn from these professionals and for the experience. A different play was produced every week during July and August.

The equity actors were experienced professionals, and some went on to further fame on Broadway, in films, and in television. Some of these included John Cassavetes, Kaye Ballard, and Claudia O'Neill who went on to play the mother in the first Broadway production of "Raisin in the Sun."

Local talent augmented the professional actors, including Roberta (Bobbie) Cutler who had been in the drama club at Cornell and worked three years in summer stock. Ruth Coffin, a guiding light in the development and support of the theater, was another fine actress mentioned by people who shared memories with me, as was the gifted Natalie Goodrich, who remained active in local theater well into the seventies.

There was other community involvement as well. People from the community helped build the sets, sold tickets, had theater party dinners or cocktails, ushered, raised money.

How did this dream theater get its start?

In the late 1800's, with the railroad came an influx of summer families who built or purchased large estates. Among these were theater families. Probably

the most famous of these were the Seymours who had a home on Washington Street where they lived at least part of each year through several generations. William Seymour was a Broadway actor and director, his wife May Davenport Seymour an actress and sister of the world-renowned Fanny Davenport who built her summer home in 1893 across the road from her sister's. Fanny Davenport and her actor husband W. Melbourne MacDowell did not appear before the public while living here, using their home as a respite from theater and spending much time on their cat boat, the *Fanny D*.

Fanny Seymour Field, daughter of William and May Seymour, wrote in the newly established Duxbury Clipper in 1950 that the Seymours and other theater families created lavish summer productions to entertain themselves, their friends and their neighbors. These continued until the First World War, and sometimes were produced on a larger scale in Mattakeesett Hall as fundraisers for churches and other community causes.

She mentions Harold Kellogg, architect of the elementary school building, who made scenery and devised "splendid lighting effects" without benefit of electricity and not without hazard. Among her memories is a performance at Mattakeesett Hall for the benefit of the Odd Fellows when an oil lamp was overturned. She was one of "a dozen or more little girls in cheesecloth dresses who were herded to the front of the stage and dropped off into waiting arms "so we wouldn't catch fire."

It was Fanny Seymour Field's daughter, actress Joan Field, who came back to Duxbury from the Broadway stage in 1945 with the dream of a summer stock theater. With her partner, director/producer Albert Moritz, she presented their plan and asked for financial backing until it could be made self-supporting. Community members would be needed to paint scenery, do props, sell tickets, and act. Only a few actors would be brought in from New York at "meager" salaries.

### **The Duxbury Playhouse**

Support was forthcoming and the Duxbury Players were born. The Duxbury Playhouse opened in the old GAR Hall on Washington Street, on the

second floor. The building had its problems as a theater, with only a tiny stage and exits that opened to the outside staircases. An actor often had to go out one door, down the staircase, run around the building and up those stairs to make another entrance.

Their most ambitious production in that space was Clare Boothe Luce's comedy, *The Women*. Bobbie Cutler played the vamp Crystal. People still talk about her bathtub scene. Joan Field acted in the productions, and Al Moritz directed.

The new company was competing with another semi-professional theater run by Franklin Trask of the Priscilla Beach Theatre, who was putting on productions up the street in Mattakeesett Hall. The Duxbury Players won the battle for audiences, and after Trask closed down, Field moved her productions to the more spacious Mattakeesett Hall.

There was increased financial support from backers Albert Harvey, Margaret Metcalf, C. Russell Eddy and his wife, B.F. Goodrich, Jr., C. Winthrop Coffin and others. Ruth Coffin remained an important benefactor of the new theater. Several years later, the Duxbury Playhouse board purchased the Bay Farm and converted the enormous barn into the Duxbury Playhouse, a unique and charming summer theater.

Many wore gowns and tuxedos to the gala opening of the 1949 season, and Duxbury writer Cid Ricketts Sumner cut the ribbon in the opening ceremony. One of her books had already been made into the movie, *Pinky*, a groundbreaking film about black people "passing" as whites. Sumner and Al Moritz of the playhouse had collaborated in creating a play based on her book, *Tammy out of Time*, and it would premiere at the Duxbury Playhouse later in the season. Her daughter, Bobbie Cutler, played a role in *Tammy*, as did Joan Field. Anne Shaw, the young actress who played *Tammy*, won a Broadway role in *As You Like It* starring Katherine Hepburn as a result of her performance.

The Duxbury Playhouse was "rated best of any summer theatre in New England, New York and New Jersey" by the end of the 1950 season.

In 1950, however, expenses had doubled from the previous season. Backers held a meeting attended by over a hundred people, with chairman Eddy and treasurer Harvey giving a full report. Changes were proposed, and a fund-raising campaign was begun. Up to that time, \$50,000 had been invested in the Duxbury Playhouse.

In spite of a massive Save-the-Theatre campaign in the following months, the board of directors made an announcement in 1951 that the Duxbury Playhouse had failed to meet expenses and gain enough community support to continue. The board was proposing that the Playhouse merge with a school of music, arts and drama founded in 1946 by David Blair McClosky, nationally known operatic singer, then Professor of Singing at Boston University. The backers said turning over the Playhouse to McClosky's school would offer the community "new ways of enjoying its theater without sacrificing any of the old."

McClosky was another performer with a vision. Starting with a group of seven students in Kingston, by 1951 his summer school for musicians had grown to an enrollment of over eighty. His plan was to recruit sincere young professionals and to integrate the arts at a center where young artists could work with and perform under the guidance of professionals. In his third season, he had added an orchestra of ten, which had expanded to thirty by 1951.

McClosky had been at the point of expanding his school, and felt the Duxbury Playhouse would be the perfect spot. He believed, along with many in the community, that the newly named Plymouth Rock Center of Music and Drama had the potential of becoming one of the great festivals of this country. Most of the Duxbury Playhouse backers continued their support for the new center.

Playing in his orchestras were musicians from major symphony orchestras throughout the country. His orchestra leader was George Poinar, a distinguished violinist and founder of the Spokane Civic Symphony, who was conducting and teaching at Baldwin-Wallace Conservatory in Berea, Ohio

He also brought in a top man in scenic design, Denton Snyder, as his scenic designer and technical director. His stage director was John Reich,

Broadway and Salsburg director. Art classes and galleries were added. Operas and concerts would alternate with plays. Staff, students and crew would live onsite.

Audiences were treated to outstanding opera and concerts for five summers. His *Amahl and the Night Visitors* was acclaimed as one of the best performances of this opera anywhere, including recordings made for TV. Enthusiastic music lovers were excited to have, on what was once a cow pasture, a prospective Tanglewood.

In fact, a local report sounds like a day at Tanglewood. The writer described spending a typical evening watching Poinar warm up the Symphony while the players rehearsed in the lobby for *Blithe Spirit*, which would be produced the following week. While *Rigoletto* was performed for the audience, groups from the Symphony practiced in the new sound-proof rooms in the basement. Outside, under the copper beechwood, a quartet practiced a Haydn Concerto.

The community was very much involved, one news article commenting that while Mrs. Robert Ross and her grounds committee were supervising work on shrubs, mending fences and making other improvements, another group addressed envelopes containing information about the approaching season. , Mrs. Paul Bittinger, head of the hospitality committee, was preparing a luncheon, and Betsy Ross and Kate Francke were contacting people for Friends of the Centre. Actors, ushers, set builders and painters from the community continued to volunteer their time for the experience of being part of this exciting project.

In 1953, on Thanksgiving eve, at 2:22 a.m. Duxbury firefighters were called to the Duxbury Playhouse. The 3½ story wood frame farmhouse, which served as a girls' dormitory, was on fire. The building burned to the ground, but firefighters were able to keep the blaze away from the theater.

The Center then purchased the White Brothers' barn and refurbished it for a dormitory. Other improvements were made at a cost of \$42,000 of which \$5,500 came from fire insurance, \$8,000 from mortgage, and \$18,500 from friends.

At the end of 1954, Albert A. Harvey, chairman of the Board of Directors in a report in the Clipper, wrote that up to August of 1954, the property represented an investment of \$80,000, and that few if any capital expenditure would be needed in the near future.

Each season continued to operate at a deficit of thousands of dollars, and when the center lost one of its largest backers, it closed in 1955. The end of the playhouse/school on the bay must have been heartbreaking for all those who had given their energies, their hearts, and their dollars to this dream.

### **The Duxbury Bay Players**

The demise of the performing arts center left a void for those who loved theater. Two Duxbury teachers, Larry Dunn and Donald Prigge, approached Bobbie Cutler, knowing of her involvement with the original Duxbury Playhouse, and asked her to get together a group of interested people with the idea of forming a community theater with the nucleus of local actors from Playhouse productions.

In the living room of the Cutler home, that small group created the Duxbury Bay Players, the name chosen to remember the playhouse on the Bay. Charter members also included Debbie Nelson, Liz Vinal, Hugh Cronister, Judie Brodie, June Doane, Natalie Goodrich, Bud Sawyer, Don Fowke, Robert Hale, Roger Jarvis, JoAnn Collins, Richard Woodsum.

Early meetings were in homes, the Girl Scout House, Westwinds Bookshop and the Congregational Church. The first production was "The Happy Time" directed by Larry Dunn. JoAnn Collins acted in many of the early plays. Harriet and Everett Marston joined soon after and continued their joint participation until Everett's death. Harriet stayed on for decades until poor health forced her off stage. She never missed a show, and in her will gave a bequest to the Players to start a fund to build or refurbish a theater. James Quine, David Wells, Chad Mauer, and Steve Loring were active in the early years through the seventies.

During their first few seasons, the Bay Players produced two shows a year, later increased to three. As with the original Players, anyone interested in

theater is welcomed and may audition. Entire families are involved. People meet during a show and sometimes marry. Places to perform remain a problem, and audience support is still a major issue.

After their first musical, *Oklahoma* in 1969, actors and singers were attracted from other communities. Membership now includes thirteen South Shore Communities. Standards were raised and production values improved greatly over the years, demanding much more dedication from members.

In the seventies, new talented families joined the Players: Michael and Adele Pevzner, Bob and Linda Dolan, Bob and Marie Gillet, Dick Stott and daughter Sara, Tom and Maggie McGovern, Jim and Ricki Bowser, the Neubauer family, Joan and Arthur Paquette, Shirley and Lou Iritsky. Director Veronica Nielsen brought Gilbert & Sullivan to the Players, which, in turn attracted director/actor/singer/set designer Peter Kates.

Through the seventies and eighties and part of the nineties, these new people invigorated the Players, as did the new performing space that became available.

When the present high school was built, originally a middle school, it was equipped with one of the best stages in any area school, with adequate height, wing space, backstage areas, lighting potential. It was called a real gift to the community, and at town meeting the promise was made to share this space with the community.

The performing space also included a small "black box" theater, which allows a wonderfully intimate, flexible space especially suited to small audience shows. This small theater made possible the Bay Players' productions of shows like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Audiences said they felt like they were in the attic with the Frank Family, and that being almost in George and Martha's living room certainly added to the tension.

The Bay Players and theatergoers in the community have received great benefits from the school space. The company, in repayment, has purchased curtains, including an expensive scrim that allows beautifully dramatic lighting effects, and lighting equipment for the HS stage.

Theater has come full circle, however, and recently the Bay Players were close to disbanding. The schools, and their fine, well-equipped performing spaces, are no longer as available to the Players. For decades, the high school stage had been reserved for the Bay Players' musical the two weeks before Thanksgiving. In the past six or seven years, this is no longer the case. Without the high school facilities, large musicals cannot be produced.

In attempting shows in other town facilities, the Players found they were losing their audience base, and production values have suffered. In short, the Bay Players are desperately seeking a theater. Space is needed for performances, office activities, and storage of flats, costumes, and props. The group had hoped to be able to use of the old library building as a performing space after the Alden library opened. If the town had agreed to an inexpensive, long-term lease for the building, the Players would have been able to refurbish the building into a small theater with their building fund. They were planning acting and technical classes and a theatrical library.

More modest than the playhouse on the bay, the plan was deemed feasible by the Players, who were certain they could remain financially sound and maintain the building. The group has always been self-supporting. Unfortunately for the Players, the school plans for using the Wright building was favored instead by the town decision-makers.

The Players struggled through the late nineties, and are regrouping for the Millennium, helped by new members like Bern and Betsy Budd and the Troiana family.

### **Theater in the Schools**

Concurrent with the development of the Bay Players, the Duxbury schools continued to strengthen their drama programs, including a Tournament of Plays where Freshman, Sophomore and Junior classes compete with one-act plays. Through the Thespians Club, students hone their acting abilities and learn stagecraft through production. I've been awed by the talent of many student actors and musicians over the years. The list of the recipients of the Bay Players'

Harriet and Everett Marston Award (given each year to a high school senior for excellence in the performing arts) is a real honor list.

### **American Legion Minstrel Shows**

Any story of theater in Duxbury has to include the tremendously popular annual shows of the Duxbury Post of the American Legion.

In *The Duxbury Book*, Bob Hale tells the delightful story of three legionnaires—Walter Prince, Eben Briggs, and George Newitt—traveling to Plymouth in 1932 to ask renowned actor/director/minstrel show producer George Phillips if he would give permission for them to hire his 17-year-old daughter Harriet to direct the legion's first minstrel show. Permission was granted, and the wonderfully talented Harriet, who later married Dick Crocker and moved to Duxbury, directed all but two of the shows for the next 36 years.

The minstrel shows became variety revues in the more socially conscious fifties. Harriet's tambourine routines can still be seen in the annual Yacht Club shows.

### **"Theatricals" at the DYC and Other Organizations**

The very first theatrical production in Duxbury that I could find document was a Duxbury Yacht Club presentation of *The Mikado* in 1881, only three years after the Gilbert & Sullivan operetta had its London opening.

The yacht club presented many "Theatricals" over the years. Some were actual shows, some revues, and others original material written by DYC members. The fact that the new clubhouse contained a stage and proscenium attests to the popularity of these shows. From 1923 on the DYC show has been produced annually.

Churches and other organizations have produced shows over the years, all finding an enormous amount of talent in the community, some whose jobs or life situations preclude them from the full commitment needed for a theater company. Live theater continues to have its own special attraction.

*The story of theater in Duxbury is a story of vision, of dreams, of heartache and disappointment. It's the story of fun, dedication, the urge to create, hard work, exhilaration and sometimes pure magic.. The story continues.*